

# American

## NEWS & VIEWS

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|   |   |
|---|---|
| Law Barring Burmese Dissidents from Election Is a “Mockery” .....     | 1 |
| President Obama Pledges Long-Term U.S. Commitment to Haiti .....      | 1 |
| Vice President Biden Tells Israelis Status Quo Is Unsustainable ..... | 2 |
| U.S. Human Rights Report Has Far-Reaching Impact .....                | 3 |

## Law Barring Burmese Dissidents from Election Is a “Mockery”

By Stephen Kaufman  
Staff Writer

Washington — The Burmese election law that bars the participation of the country’s political prisoners, including National League of Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, “makes a mockery of the democratic process,” the Obama administration says.

Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs P.J. Crowley said March 10 that the United States is “deeply disappointed” with the Political Party Registration Law announced earlier that day by Burma’s ruling military junta. The new measure is the second of five election laws governing the conduct of Burma’s proposed 2010 election.

Crowley said the law prevents all of Burma’s more than 2,000 political prisoners from participating in the election and described it as “a step in the wrong direction” that “makes a mockery of the democratic process.”

“Given the tenor of the election laws that they put forward, there’s no hope that this election will be credible,” he said.

“We are also troubled that the law appears to bar National League of Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from running. It may also prohibit her from membership in her own party,” he said. A more inclusive political process that allows for Suu Kyi’s restoration and ability to have a place in the country’s future “would be an important step” toward better relations with the United States, he said.

Crowley said the Obama administration will continue its dialogue with Burma’s rulers, but the United States will show “determination and resolve” and make clear that the junta must show “more flexibility” toward the country’s internal political process if it wants to see Burma advance.

“If Burma has any hope of the kind of broader relationship with the outside world ... it has to find a way to have a process where it has meaningful dialogue with ethnic groups and other political movements,” Crowley said. This is necessary for the country’s self-interest, he said, and the United States will continue to press that message to the military leadership.

Crowley said engagement with the Burmese rulers is in the national interests of the United States and “a recognition that past policies isolating Burma have not had results,” rather than being a reward for the military junta.

“We did not expect to have a couple of conversations with Burma and have a complete about-face and change in the nature of their society, in the nature of their political process,” he said.

A senior State Department official who asked not to be identified said the continued lack of openness in Burmese politics limits the level of cooperation between the United States and Burma in the “short- to mid-term.”

The Obama administration would like to see Burma emerge from its long international isolation and is offering the country’s rulers a different kind of relationship with the United States, “but part of the depth of that relationship will depend on how Burma adapts. And this kind of recalcitrance will inform what we do in the future,” the official said.

## President Obama Pledges Long-Term U.S. Commitment to Haiti

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.  
Staff Writer

Washington — The reconstruction of earthquake-stricken Haiti could take more than a decade and cost between \$8 billion and \$14 billion, but the United States pledges a lasting commitment to the people of Haiti to see it through, President Obama says.

“The situation on the ground remains dire, and people should be under no illusions that the crisis is over,” Obama said at a White House press conference with Haitian President René Préval at his side March 10. “Many Haitians are still in need, desperate need in some cases, of shelter and food and medicine.”

“And with the spring rains approaching, those needs will only grow. The challenge now is to prevent a second disaster,” Obama said.

Préval thanked Obama for his commitment and thanked the United States for its outpouring of support and assistance, both military and civilian, in getting through the immediate crisis. But he also advised that there are strong lessons to be learned by the international community for its response in future natural disasters.

“We must draw the lessons from what occurred in Haiti — the massive, spontaneous, generous help was a good response to the disaster. However, its effectiveness must be improved, because effectiveness depends on the quality of coordination,” Préval said.

Préval was in Washington to meet with the president and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to discuss the situation in Haiti and his plans for the island nation’s

recovery. Haiti is one of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere and had not had a chance for full recovery from the effects of a 2008 hurricane when a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck near the capital, Port-au-Prince, on January 12, killing an estimated 230,000 people and displacing millions.

A preliminary study by international economists at the Inter-American Development Bank estimated that it will cost between \$8.1 billion and \$14 billion over a period of 10 years for a full recovery of the impoverished nation. The economists said no single international organization or nation could manage or pay for the reconstruction of Haiti, that it would take a combined effort because of the staggering destruction caused by the accumulated natural disasters.

#### INTERNATIONAL DONORS' CONFERENCE

A donors' conference to mobilize international support for the long-term development and recovery of Haiti will be held at the United Nations March 31.

The conference "will be an opportunity, an important opportunity, for all parties," Obama said. "Haiti can lead the way, and will lead the way, with a strong vision for its future."

The ministerial-level conference is being sponsored jointly by the United States and the United Nations in cooperation with the Haitian government, and also with the support of Brazil, Canada, the European Union, France and Spain. It is being called the International Donors' Conference Towards a New Future for Haiti.

"Donor countries, international organizations and other partners will have an opportunity to pledge resources, to coordinate support of Haiti's long-term recovery, and to commit to a sustained effort to support Haiti," the State Department said in an announcement.

In addition, the Dominican Republic, which is Haiti's nearest neighbor, will host an international conference of high-level technical donors to evaluate the economic consequences of the earthquake. Scheduled for March 16-17 in Santo Domingo, it will serve as the base for the donors' conference at the United Nations, according to Dominican government officials.

#### **Vice President Biden Tells Israelis Status Quo Is Unsustainable**

By Stephen Kaufman  
Staff Writer

Washington — Reaffirming the U.S. commitment to Israel's security, Vice President Biden told Israelis that

peace with an independent Palestinian state is "profoundly" in their country's interests.

He urged both sides in the conflict to end the cycle of violence and distrust and move forward in good-faith negotiations to reach a final peace settlement.

"I am an optimist about the prospects for peace because I am a realist," Biden said March 11 at Tel Aviv University. Although achieving peace will be difficult, "there is nowhere else to go," he said. "The status quo is not sustainable."

Biden said a two-state solution is necessary to preserve Israel's identity and achieve lasting security, while also restoring Palestinian dignity and self-respect, which is being denied by their current predicament.

"It's no secret the demographic realities make it increasingly difficult for Israel to remain both a Jewish homeland and a democratic country in the absence of the Palestinian state," the vice president said. "Genuine steps toward a two-state solution are also required to empower those living to live in peace and security with Israel and to undercut their rivals who will never accept that future."

Biden told his Israeli audience that the Palestinian Authority, led by President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, has been working to combat incitement against Israel and reform Palestinian institutions, including building an effective security force that will be able to uphold law and order throughout the Palestinian territories.

"Their commitment to peace is an opportunity that must be seized," he said. "Who has there been better, to date, to have the prospect of settling this with?"

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has endorsed the idea of a Palestinian state and improved the economy and freedom of movement in the West Bank by removing roadblocks and checkpoints, Biden said.

"It's time for Israeli and Palestinian leaders to acknowledge each other's steps to heed this call, even when more remains to be done — and for the world to do the same thing," he said.

Indirect discussions must progress to direct talks between the two sides to resolve permanent-status issues. These must "go promptly and go forward in good faith," he said. "You've got to begin."

Describing himself as a "strong supporter of Israel" throughout his 37 years as a U.S. public official, Biden told the audience in Tel Aviv that "sometimes only a friend can deliver the hardest truth," and he repeated his

condemnation of planned new Israeli settlement construction in East Jerusalem.

"Because that decision, in my view, undermined the trust required for productive negotiations, I ... at the request of President Obama condemned it immediately and unequivocally," he said.

### **U.S. Human Rights Report Has Far-Reaching Impact**

*Tracking human rights freedoms, abuses, offers variety of benefits*

By Jane Morse  
Staff Writer

Washington — The original purpose for the annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices was to provide the U.S. Congress with information on countries to which the United States sends aid. "But it has become much bigger than that," according to Michael H. Posner.

"Today it is the single most comprehensive look at human rights around the world done by anyone," Posner, assistant secretary for the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, told America.gov in a recent interview. The report is "a baseline of information about what's going on in human rights every year."

The Human Rights Report, its commonly used shortened title, covers internationally recognized civil, political and worker rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These rights include freedom from torture and other cruel treatment, freedom from prolonged detention without charge, and freedom from other flagrant violations of the rights to life, liberty and security.

This year the report has been expanded. More information will be reported on workers' rights, child soldiers, reproductive rights, practices that endanger indigenous people, and discrimination against homosexuals and victims of HIV/AIDS.

"Activists in many countries rely on the report," Posner said, "both because it gives them information they can't get from their own media, and also because as a product of the United States government it has some extra importance and power. And so we find that a lot of activists not only read the report, they circulate the report, they cite the report, and it gives them a sense of amplifying their own concerns [about human rights] and gives them some more authority in debating these issues within their own societies."

The report encourages governments to improve their human rights practices, according to Posner. He credits the findings of the annual reports for motivating the

government of Zimbabwe to close in the mid-1980s at least one prison in which prisoners suffered under horrible conditions. The U.S. Human Rights Report, Posner said, often draws attention to abuses that would otherwise go unnoticed on the world stage.

"And governments under the pressure of that kind of scrutiny decide to make changes," he said.

The Human Rights Report also plays a role in determining refugee status in immigration courts in the United States, Posner said. "It's not definitive, but it has been a central piece in making the claim that somebody is going to fear persecution being returned to their home country," Posner said. "So the report became an essential document in that quasi-judicial setting."

Since September 2009, Posner has been in charge of the State Department operation that collects, assembles and distributes human rights information on more than 190 governments. For many years he was a consumer and critic of the report — first as the executive director and then as the president of Human Rights First, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, international human rights organization based in New York and Washington. In those capacities, he said, he spent many hours examining the methodology, findings and evolution of the report.

Mandated by the U.S. Congress in the mid-1970s, the report has steadily grown to include more comprehensive reviews on the practices of a greater number of governments on a greater range of human rights practices. "Now we have a really radically different product," Posner said. "It's thousands of pages long, and it reflects a much more sophisticated fact-gathering approach both at the embassy level and here in Washington. So it really is quite an extraordinary document in terms of its comprehensiveness and detail."

Although most people might focus on the individual country reports themselves, Posner has been interested in the impact they've had on the people producing them. The Human Rights Report, Posner said, "has probably been the single most important educative tool for the [U.S.] Foreign Service."

"We've developed a culture where our diplomats are mandated by law to go out and meet human rights leaders and journalists and human rights activists and civil society — all sorts of people who are not traditionally at the center of what an embassy would be doing," Posner said. "And that has had an unbelievable impact in terms of the sensitivity of foreign service officers to what [human rights] is all about."

The goal of the U.S. Human Rights Report is to tell the truth, Posner said. "It is for sure going to make things

more complicated for our diplomats around the world," Posner said. "We're going to have governments mad at them because we are telling the truth. But that gives the exercise integrity. And it's part of the way we are operating and have operated and will continue to operate. That discomfort is far outweighed in my mind by having accurate assessment of what's going on so that we can make intelligent policy decisions."

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